ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP: A MISSING LINK IN HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE IN TIMES OF CHANGE?

Aida Sagintayeva

Much ink has been shed on academic leadership in higher education. Over the recent years, due to sweeping organisational changes, the field of leadership has gained much emphasis. Despite different theories and types of leadership, the fact remains that little is known about the phenomenon of 'leadership' especially when we attempt to figure out the meaning of academic leadership in a particular social context (Altbach, 2011). In present times of ever-changing relationships between the academic institution and its environment.academic leaders experience uncertainty and have to cope with rapid learning. In this vein, Altbach is adamant that "people who are called upon to lead universities in the twenty-first century face a difficult task for which they are, in general, unprepared" (2011:1). The purpose of this paper is twofold. I will briefly unpack the essence of academic leadership with consideration of the operating context and internal environment of an academic institution.Though, given the narrow scope of the paper, I make no attempt to list the content of the leadership phenomenon that abound in the current scholarship today. I will then outline context-sensitive opportunities and challenges for academic leadership to develop on campuses of post-Soviet universities with the case of Kazakhstan. The paper is based on empirical research findings drawn from the long-term international study on higher education governance and management initiated by Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education in 2012.The data is drawn from the field research done in 2013 that involved in-depth one-to-one interviews and focus groups with university rectors, deans, vice deans, chairs of academic departments, faculty members and students in Kazakhstan's public universities.

Introduction

Manyscholars have addressed the issue of academic leadership (Johnstone,2011; Middlehurst, 1999; Scott et al. 2008). Despite the fact that there are different theories of leadership, one thing remains clear. There is much to be gained if academic institutions would study patterns of their institutional leadership and the organisational culture within it (Schein, 1985; Kezar & Eckel, 2002). As more drastic changes emerge on campuses, most stakeholders would naturally wonder what makes an effective higher education leader that is capable to lead those transformational changes today. Based on my professional experience and academic literature, leaders of higher education institutions are those who have the capacity to lead the change.inspire faculty members and have a strategic vision for their institution (Birnbaum, 1992; Johnstone, 2011). Following in the footsteps of Robert Birnbaum, I believe that "leadership involves moving others towards a shaped perception of reality, towards a common understanding of where the organization is and whether it should be going, and toward an increased commitment to those ends" (1992:16). Having a team that has shared understanding of the strategic goals of the academic institution is only one element of effective leadership. Given the rapid reform movements in the higher education sector, a capacity to cope with changes and uncertainties has become one of the most valuable professional attributes of a contemporary higher education leader.

Scott et a l. (2008:44) based on the long-term empirical research with surveying 513 higher education leaders (a combination of pro vice chancellors, deputy vice-chancellors, deans and heads of schools, associate deans and heads of programmes) from 20 of Australia's 38 public universities, state that it is clarifying strategies, managing continuous changes and dealing with slow administrative processes that serve as the main influence shaping academic leadership.

The authors conclude that "institutional change capacity and responsiveness emerge as the most influential cluster of factors in shaping leadership" (ibid., 2008).

In another case of research on higher education leadership, done by *the Chronicle of Higher Education* in the US, the findings of an extensive survey of 350 presidents of four-year colleges reveal that despite the fact that innovative ideas for reforming higher education are being tested and delivered with measurable results by researchers, professors and entrepreneurs and college presidents, much of that work remains unfamiliar to many leaders and as a result detached from their conversations and strategy for the future (Selingo, 2014:12). At the same time, two-thirds of university presidents say that the pace of change is too slow (ibid., 2014). These findings show that the transfer of ideas to actual actions on the part of university leadership hindered by the context-sensitive culture of change management complicates the process of effective leadership.

Thus far, the issue of developing academic leadership has become one of the priorities at higher education institutions around the world and deserves to be the subject of educational research in its own right.

Why the Question of Academic Leadership is so Important?

Managing changes in times of uncertainty is a complex process that requires different skills and qualities of effective leadership. In the higher education context, university leaders have to act as the interface between their local campus community and the environment. Surely, higher education leaders are nowadays expected to lead and be proactive not only inside the institution but also outside. As Johnstone (2011:185) states:

> *"the most-effective higher education Leadership would feature the ability to influence faculty as well as the ability to influence significant politicians - in combination with the authority to effect the desired changes"*

This is especially true for the leadership of academic institutions experiencing transformational changes and transitions as is the case of post-Soviet states. The changing context of the state - university relationships has emphasised the issue of higher education leadership. In times of economic austerity measures, national and global competition (Marginson, 2006) higher education leaders have been hard pressed *to realise full potential against high standards.* As many governments developed an official discourse of New Public Management (NPM) with strong elements of marketisation, managerialism and performativity, many higher education reforms have been initiated by the state rather than academic institutions. Given the trend of quality control and performance measurement, academic leadership has gradually become inhibited and thus neglected. On a similar note, Christensen (2011: 507) is adamant that

> *"the university reform processes, like the overall NPM reform processes, have comparatively often been rather top-down, with the political-administrative leadership controlling the processes, in some cases supported by parliaments, the business community or regional/local government."*

As part of global higher education reforms in much of the world, there has been a tendency for decentralisation, delegation of responsibility from public authorities to higher education institutions. Many governments and university leaders are now puzzled with finding right ways of striking a balance between centralised control and institutional autonomy. Given the social context and the established pattern of state-university relationships, it is unwise to consider that higher education institutions could mechanically become independent with their academic leaders being responsible for communicating directions and visions of where those universities are going. As Dill (2001: 30) points out:

One approach adopted by a number of countries and US states recognizes that not all universities are prepared for the full assumption of authority and responsibility (...). This is particularly the case in those countries where universities have traditionally been shielded from market forces bygovernment policyand/orwhere educational ministries previously implemented many policies now being delegated to the university level."

For instance, in Kazakhstan's case, the ministerial initiative to introduce the system of electing university rectors among their academic communities is another move towards reducing control from the government and delegating responsibilities to universities. It is envisioned that university leaders will be in charge of long-term strategic initiatives on their campuses and be accountable for the institutional development. As Johnstone (2011:177) points out:

"more effective higher education leadership also requires better governmental policies that give people in leadership positions the freedom to make difficult decisions, the support in the face of the inevitable push back from elements in the academy against these changes, and the resources needed to implement the new policies"

Another important aspect of academic leadership is middle management of the university. With the increasing rhetoric of institutional autonomy, middle-level managers including deans, associate deans.chairs and heads of faculties and programmes also need professional autonomy that would provide enough room for their leadership in team-based settings and thus become transmitters of organisational wisdom. Distributed leadership is a new perspective of higher education management. Professionals that recognise the importance of distributed leadership are likely to develop patterns of effective middle management on their own campuses.

Faculty involvement in institutional governance is another important aspect to consider in the discussion of academic leadership. The issue of faculty involvement directly refers to the debate about shared governance. From my professional experience of both teaching and administering public universities, I can state that faculty members are not always willing to take leadership roles and play a part in administrative decision-making processes. It is true that most academics express their deep commitment to teaching and research rather than administering and playing key roles in institutional decision-making. Entrenched academic conservatism and lack of enthusiasm to change the institutional culture usually hinder the professoriate's leadership capacity. Given this circumstance, research literature on higher education leadership confirms that decision-making power of the academic councils and boards are not really effective and the voice of the university administration remains domineering (Johnstone, 2011; Willis, 2011).

The Context

One would agree that the situation with the academic institutions of the former Soviet Union is rather complex compared to established higher education institutions of Western Europe and North America as the former had to go through difficult experiences and hard times in the transition stage towards market economy and the era of new public management. The higher education sector in post-Soviet countries has experienced a considerable period of change over the last two decades. Understandably, post-Soviet states had to focus on education as one of the main pillars for socio-economic development of their nations. Higher education leaders have been expected to be responsive to drastic changes related to the marketization of education.

In Kazakhstan's case, the Ministry of Education and Science has provided a legislative framework for the higher education to function. A stage-by-stage strategic plan to transition towards institutional autonomy, introduction of mechanisms to select university rectors and the introduction of board of trustees as a constituency of shared governance constitute current official policy discourse of decentralisation of higher education. It is obvious that the rhetoric of policy initiatives play the part of *'policy out'* expressed in the wording of the official decrees,

orders and Laws (Offe 1984: 186, in Ball, 1998: 127). With the rapid reform movement, there is good reason to ask if the reform movement makes sense to higher education leaders and how academic leaders, including rectors, vice-rectors, deans and heads of departments develop ownership of the reforms on their campuses.

Context matters in developing patterns of effective higher education leadership. As Middlehurst (2004: 277) states:

> "on *important missing element of the discussion is the part played by leaders, managers (and indeed governors) in making change happen and ensuring its sustainability. The people who carry the responsibilities, individually and collectively, have to address the structural and cultural inhibitors of change.*"

Therefore.the research question I pose here is'whatare the context-sensitive opportunities and challenges for academic leadership to develop in Kazakhstan's higher education universities?". We held four one-to-one interviews with university rectors, nine one-to-one interviews with vice-rectors, 19 focus group interviews with deans and faculty members.

What the Data Tells us

Within the limited scope of the paper, this section will briefly discuss four main concerns that are likely to be typical of higher education leadership in post-Soviet states taking the case of Kazakhstan.

Transitioning from Fellowship to Leadership in Higher Education Institutions

In the context of decentralisation and institutional autonomy, the data analysis has shown that there is much concern about the institutional transition from following official policies to becoming a leader with a capacity to engage with academic entrepreneurship and innovation on campus. When asked a question 'How would things change if your university were given institutional self-governance?', many deans noted the risk of falling back on the habit of following externally assigned orders and commands that are typically issued by the central ministry. One respondent of the deans'focus group said the following:

> "*we need an iron hand of the commander control in order for us to see the targets. Someone to follow, the one who knows what to do. Who are we to blame if something goes wrong on our campus? I am not sure that all the institutions are ready to take a role of leadership of their university at their own pace.*" *(Deans, focus group, University B, June, 2013)*

The data has shown that the university leadership has grown habituated towards the post-Soviet tradition of central control from the top which serves as a good example of path dependency in higher education. As Christensen (2011: 506) states:

> "*Path-dependency means that the cultural roots that a public organization develops in its early years will heavily influence it during its later trajectory and development (...). The notion of cultural compatibility is important for understanding how reforms are handled in public organizations. A reform that is rather compatible with the basic cultural norms and values in an organization would be implemented rather easily, while a reform that is confrontational would be more likely to be bounced back, modified or only partly implemented*"

Higher education leadership is likely to experience the struggle between the entrenched perceptions of seeing academic institutions and their management as followers and the new policy initiative of demonstrating their leadership capacities.

Cultivating the Emergence of Leadership within the University

Academic institutions are expected to develop institutionally relevant patterns of academic leadership on their campuses. It is worth noting that higher education leadership is about to

experience succession crisis. To date, the median age of university leaders is 59. There should be an effective system of developing and training prospective higher education leaders in order to provide a proper mechanism of succession.

A proper system of electing rectors, based on the legislative framework, is likely to enable the university administration to come up with effective mechanisms of electing rectors, vice-rectors and deans. When asked a question 'From your viewpoint, does your institution provide opportunities to develop strong academic leadership on campus?' one faculty member of the focus group said:

"Much depends on the leader, be it a Chair or Rector. To have a closer relationship within the university and different units, we should have a right to elect a rector. So, broadly speaking, we will need to announce the position across the country. I'm not talking about the quality of our current rector or [our] former head. I'm talking about the ways to make their work and our own development more effective. So, in this scenario, the Rector should be accountable to us and we are to him. If we propose something and vote, we are also responsible for this. So, this is the key question." (Faculty members, focus group B, University B, June, 2013)

Distributed leadership

The data has shown that there are elements of distributed leadership within academic departments of universities. However, we have learnt that when the matter comes to institutional decision making, it is mostly established administrators that would be in charge. One junior faculty member of the focus group said:

"We have an academic council. We do not participate in any council; mostly it is administrators who are involved in councils"(Juniorfaculty members, focus group C, University B, June, 2013)

Given the shared responsibility for strategic management, university leaders are likely to gradually learn to delegate responsibilities and look for opportunities and mechanisms to provide room for distributed leadership to develop. Effective higher education leadership would include allocation of responsibilities and delegation of institutional decision making to other constituencies alongside the hierarchy of university management. As Ameijde et a I. (2009:777) point out:

Instead of focusing on the development of the leadership capabilities of an organization's designated leaders, focus would shift to investing not only in developing leadership skills of the workforce as a whole, but also to facilitating the conditions conductive for the emergence of successful distributed leadership and the formation of informal networks of expertise.

Faculty Involvement in Academic Leadership

Similar to the point made above, most respondents believed that faculty members should have a say in university management. One interview participant said: "in general, shared governance is the ideal scheme for the university. Everyone has the right to participate in decision-making." (Chair A, University C, June, 2014). With the globally acknowledged fact that the academic work has a declining status and the public accountability of the university is increasing, we have asked faculty members questions about their attitudes towards leadership positions at their university settings. One faculty member said:

"Faculty members' academic leadership I believe, academic staff are supposed to be involved in teaching and research whereas administrative work needs to be done by other people, managers, for example. That is, academic staff's main activities should be teaching and research. Not like we have it now, where everyone is doing everything." (Faculty members, focus group C, University D, June 2013)

Faculty involvement in institutional decision-making could be an effective instrument only if the professoriate is really engaged with the university's strategic development and expresses genuine concern to have a say in the leadership matters. Some faculty members are not seeing their roles of decision makers on the administration level. Surely, there should be a well-developed structure for the faculty to develop their initiatives especially in the matters of academe and research.

Thus far, based on the brief data analysis of interviews among university leaders, the paper argues that the transition towards the development of academic leadership is a complex context-sensitive process. In the next decade or so, academic institutions will have to develop capacities to lead changes on their own campuses and develop their roles beyond the followship of externally designed initiatives. Both the state and the higher education leadership are likely to understand that change does not happen on its own but needs to be led by professionals and effective leaders both within and beyond universities.

References

Altboch, P.G. (2011). (ed) *Leadership for World-class Universities: Challenges for Developing Countries.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Van Ameijde, J. D., Nelson, P. C, Billsberry, J., & Van Meurs, N. (2009). *Improving leadership in higher education institutions: A distributed perspective.Higher Education, 58(6),* 763-779.

Ball, S. J. (1998). Big policies/small world: An introduction to international perspectives in education policy.

Birnbaum, R. (1992). *How Academic Leadership Works: Understanding Success and Failure in the College Presidency.* New York, NY: Wiley.

Christensen, T. (2011). University governance reforms: potential problems of more autonomy?. *Higher Education,* 62(4), 503-517.

Dill, D. D. (2001).The regulation of public research universities: changes in academic competition and implications for university autonomy and accountability.H/gner *Education Policy, 14(1),* 21-35.

Johnstone, D. N. (2011). "The Challenges of University Leadership in the Developing World." In Leadership forWorld-Class Universities:Challenges for Developing Countries,edited by P.G.

Altbach, 176-186. New York: Routledge.

Kezar.A.J., & Eckel, P. D. (2002).The effect of institutional culture on change strategies in higher education: Universal principles or culturally responsive concepts? *The Journal of Higher Education,* 73(4), 435-460.

Marginson, S. (2006). Dynamics of national and global competition in higher education. *Higher education, 5*2(1), 1-39.

Middlehurst, R. (1999). New realities for leadership and governance in higher education?. *Tertiary Education & Management,* 5(4), 307-329.

Schein, E. H. (1985). *Organisational culture and leadership: A dynamic view.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Scott, G., Coates, H., & M.Anderson (2008). Sydney: University of Western Sydney and Australian Council for Educational Research.

Selingo, J. (2014). The Innovative University: What College Presidents Think about Change in American Higher Education. Chronicle of Highe Education.

Willis, J. (2011). Faculty involvement in institutional governance: a literature review. *Journal of the Professoriate, 6(1).*